

Sūrah 108

Al-Kawthar

(Abundance)

(Makkan Period)

Title

Al-kawthar (abundance), a word in the opening verse came to be known as the *Sūrah*'s title.

Period of Revelation

On the authority of 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr and 'Ā'ishah, Ibn Marduwayh asserts that this is a Makkan *Sūrah*. The same is affirmed by Muqātil and Kalbī, as also the consensus of Qur'ānic scholars. However, Ḥasan Baṣrī, Mujāhid, 'Ikrimah and Qatādah regard it as Madīnan. In his *al-Itqān*, Imām Suyūṭī endorses this view. In his *Sharḥ Muslim*, Imām Nawawī upholds the same position. Their stance stems from Anas ibn Mālik's report cited by Imām Aḥmad, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Nasā'ī, Ibn Abī Shaybah, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Marduwayh, Bayhaqī and some other *Ḥadīth* scholars. The report is as follows: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) was sitting in our midst when he felt drowsy. Smilingly, he then raised his head. On being asked as to

why he was smiling, he himself explained: 'Just now a *Sūrah* has been sent down to me'. Then, after reciting *basmalah*, he read out *Sūrah al-Kawthar*. He then asked us the meaning of al-Kawthar. When we requested him to elucidate, as Allah and His Messenger know best, he said: 'It is a fountain in Paradise, granted to me by my Lord.'" Since Anas is Madīnan, his report is adduced as proof of this being a Madīnan *Sūrah*.

However, the same Anas reports that al-Kawthar, a fountain in Paradise, had been shown to the Prophet (peace be upon him) during his Night Journey, which happened in Makkah, much before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. This report from Anas is cited by Imām Aḥmad, Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Tirmidhī and Ibn Jarīr. Moreover, as the divine bounty of al-Kawthar had been conveyed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) during his Night Journey, the same could not be informed through a *Sūrah* revealed in Madīnah. Furthermore, had the Prophet (peace be upon him) conveyed the news about *Sūrah al-Kawthar*'s revelation to a group of Companions, how could such well-informed Companions as 'Ā'ishah, Ibn 'Abbās and Ibn al-Zubayr speak of it as Makkan, and how could so many Qur'ānic scholars subscribe to their view?

On a little reflection, there appears to be a gap in Anas's above report whereby it does not specify the context in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) informed those present about the revelation of *Sūrah al-Kawthar*. It is likely that at the time it was revealed to him that the point under discussion be elucidated in the light of this *Sūrah* and at that point he stated how this *Sūrah* had been revealed to him. Such incidents recur in *Sīrah*, which have led some Qur'ānic scholars to conclude that some verses were sent down to the Prophet (peace be upon him) twice. What this means is that Allah drew the Prophet's attention to an already revealed verse at a later date. In such instances, then, it is difficult to fix the exact date or period of its revelation.

Leaving aside Anas's report to the contrary, the contents of this *Sūrah* amply bear out its Makkan credentials. It must, then, have been sent down in Makkah when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was undergoing a very difficult time.

Circumstantial Setting

In the early phase of his mission, the Prophet (peace be upon him) encountered many hardships, a point reinforced by *Sūrah al-Duḥā* and *Alam Nashrah*. The entire Makkan community was pitted against him, placing all sorts of obstacles in his way. He was vehemently opposed and he and his Companions could not even remotely think of any breakthrough, let alone success. Against that backdrop, Allah sent down to him several verses to boost his morale and console and comfort him:

Indeed what is to come will be better for you than what has gone by. Verily your Lord will soon give you so amply that you will be well-pleased.

(*al-Duḥā* 93: 4-5)

And did We not exalt your fame? Indeed there is ease with hardship. Most certainly, there is ease with hardship.

(*Alam Nashrah* 94: 4-6)

It was during this same period that Allah revealed this *Sūrah* to him in order to comfort him. Whilst the Quraysh considered the Prophet (peace be upon him) isolated and helpless, the destruction of his enemies is nonetheless predicted here. 'Ikrimah reports that as the Prophet (peace be upon him) invited the Quraysh to Islam, they taunted him as a loner, cut off from his roots. They thought he would soon be lost to oblivion. Muḥammad ibn Ishāq relates that whenever the Prophet (peace be upon him) was mentioned in the presence of the Makkan chief, 'Āṣ ibn Wā'il Sahnī, he remarked: "Forget about him. He is alone, cut off from the roots. He does not have a son. Once he dies, there will be no one even to carry his name on." According to Shimr ibn 'Aṭīyah, another chief, 'Uqabah ibn Abī Mu'ayt, used to pass similar derogatory comments against the Prophet (peace be upon him) (Ibn Jarīr). Ibn 'Abbās narrates this report: "Once when Ka'b ibn Ashraf, the Jewish chief of Madīnah, visited Makkah, the Quraysh chiefs told him: 'Look at this lad who is cut off from his community yet he considers himself superior to us, although we arrange for pilgrimage and provide water to

pilgrims," (Bazzār). 'Ikrimah adds that the Quraysh had used the following words about the Prophet (peace be upon him) on that occasion: "A weak, lone person, without issue, who is cut off from his community," (Ibn Jarīr). Ibn Sa'd and Ibn 'Asākir quote Ibn 'Abbās's following version: "Qāsim was the Prophet's eldest son; followed by Zaynab, 'Abd Allāh and three daughters – Umm Kulthūm, Fāṭimah and Ruqayyah. Of them, Qāsim died first and then 'Abd Allah. Upon this 'Āṣ ibn Wā'il remarked: "His root is cut off from the roots." Some reports contain these additional remarks by 'Āṣ: "Muḥammad is cut off from the roots. He does not have a son to succeed him. When he dies, his name will vanish and you will get rid of him." Ibn 'Abbās's report, cited by 'Abd ibn Ḥumayd, indicates that Abū Jahl had made similar remarks on the death of the Prophet's son, 'Abd Allāh. Shimr ibn 'Aṭiyyah reports, as is quoted by Ibn Abī Ḥātim, that 'Uqabah ibn Abī Mu'ayt passed similar demeaning and callous comments on the Prophet's bereavement. 'Atā' informs us that when the Prophet's other son 'Abd Allāh died, Abū Lahab, the Prophet's uncle and next door neighbour, rushed to the Quraysh, giving them the 'good news' that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had lost his male heir and was now a person cut off from the roots."

It was against such adverse conditions that this *Sūrah* was sent down. The Quraysh opposed him for his call to worship the One True God and for his denunciation of their polytheism. He also lost the esteem in which he was held in his pre-Prophetic days and faced social boycott. His Companions were too weak, subject to torture and persecution. His troubles were compounded by the death of his two sons, one after the other. His own kith, kin and tribesmen, far from sharing his sorrow, celebrated his loss. They hurled such offensive taunts at him as are reserved for one's worst enemy. They behaved thus towards him while he had been so kind and affectionate towards them.

Allah, therefore, blesses him with the greatest glad tidings imaginable to man: "(O Prophet), We have surely bestowed upon you good in abundance," (Verse 1). He is also promised that his enemies will be cut off from their roots.